

Early English Protestants.

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"Reforming Parliament" of 1529 was not actuated by an aggressive spirit against the hierarchy. It did not strike a blow at the power of the Church in the spirit of a Luther, as some of the historians would have us believe. It did not throw its protecting arm over the heretics, though in a subsequent session it passed an Act to ensure them a fair trial. It merely attacked abuses like pluralities, mortuary fees, fines for probates exacted by the ecclesiastical courts. Its aim was not to destroy but to improve the Church.

As for the Lollards, they had evidently remained but an obscure fraction of the nation. Luther, and even Zwingli, had already some disciples, and Tyndale's translation of the New Testament, which appeared in 1526, had some readers. We hear, too, of the Association of Christian Brothers in London, composed chiefly of traders and artisans, who distributed Protestant literature in clandestine fashion. The universities were found by Wolsey's inquisitors to be infected with heresy, bred by Lutheran and Zwinglian books; and heterodox teachers and students like Barnes at Cambridge, and Clarke and Garret at Oxford, were compelled to recant or forced to seek refuge with Tyndale at Antwerp. More, whilst chancellor, signalled his hatred of "this kind of men" by burning those who refused to recant. So keen was the scent of the heresy hunters, under More's auspices, that they smellecl heresy in the sermons of Latimer, Henry's chaplain, who, while sympathising with men like the martyr, Thomas Bilney, one of More's victims, and, like Latimer himself, a Cambridge man, was at this period rather a practical than a doctrinal preacher. He was only saved by the intervention of the king, who relished the outspoken style in which he rated high ecclesiastical dignitaries like the Bishop of Ely. Another of these scholarly enthusiasts, John Frith of Cambridge, was less fortunate, and was burned at Smithfield in 1533 for obstinately holding a doctrine of the Lord's Supper analogous to that of Zwingli. A few more victims swell the roll of these early martyrs of English Protestantism, but the number of those who went beyond the limits of reform set by the king in his capacity of supreme head of the Church was not large, though they seem at times, to judge from the complaints of the bishops, to have been very demonstrative and aggressive.